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NEWS RELEASE

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Idaho's First 2006 Report of West Nile Virus Found in Gem County

West Nile virus was found in mosquitoes from Gem County, prompting health officials to remind people to 'Fight the Bite' of mosquitoes around their homes or when they are outdoors. Last year, West Nile virus was discovered in 15 southern Idaho counties, infecting 13 people, over 100 horses and a dozen birds. This is the first indication of WNV in Idaho for 2006. So far this year, seven other states have reported West Nile activity to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

West Nile virus is usually spread through the bite of an infected mosquito. Mosquito transmission is possible until a killing frost, which will likely not come again until the fall. West Nile virus does not generally spread from person-to-person or from infected animals to people.

"About 80 percent of people who are bitten by an infected mosquito will not become sick, but others may experience a mild, flu-like illness that can include headaches, body aches and a fever," says Dr. Leslie Tengelsen, Deputy State Epidemiologist. "Although rare, the virus can lead to serious illness, especially in people over the age of 50."

Tengelsen says it is important for people to take precautions. Last year 3,000 Americans were infected with the virus, with almost 120 dying from complications of the virus.

To protect themselves, people are advised to:

- Insect-proof their homes by repairing or replacing screens;
- Reduce standing water on their property that provides mosquito breeding habitat, such as bird baths and decorative ponds;

(more)

- Cover up exposed skin when outdoors;
- Apply insect repellent approved by the EPA to exposed skin and clothing. Follow instructions on the product label, especially for children;
- Avoid mosquitoes when they are most active at dawn and dusk; and
- Report dead wild birds to your local Fish and Game office.

West Nile virus does not usually affect most animals including dogs and cats, but can cause severe illness in horses and certain species of birds. Although there is not a vaccine available for people, there are several vaccines available for horses. Since the introduction of equine vaccines, the number of horses reported with West Nile infections has decreased dramatically, from 15,000 horses in 2002 to less than 1,300 nationwide last year.

Like horses, certain birds also are adversely affected by West Nile virus. The Idaho Department of Fish and Game will be testing and documenting dead birds this season. “Magpies, crows, raptors, ravens and jays frequently die from West Nile infections,” says Dr. Mark Drew, Idaho Fish and Game veterinarian. “We want to monitor our bird populations to determine the effects West Nile is having on wildlife in Idaho.”

Drew advises people who find dead birds to call their local Fish and Game office. “We will record all dead birds and test magpies, crows, raptors, ravens and jays that are appropriate for testing,” Dr. Drew says. “Generally, we are most interested in testing birds that have been dead for less than 48-hours.”

With warmer weather, people are spending more time outdoors doing yard work or taking part in outdoor recreation opportunities. Tengelsen advises people to take precautions now. “West Nile virus is now part of our ecosystem and we can all do our part to reduce mosquito breeding habitat around our homes by reducing standing water,” she says. “By doing that and taking personal protective measures to avoid mosquito bites, we can fight the bite and enjoy the great Idaho outdoors.”

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(Editors: For more information please contact Tom Shanahan, 334-0668, or your District Health Department Public Information Officer.)